Indian Writers Series

Chandrasekhar Rath

Stories

grassroots

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Stories

Translated from the Oriya by
Paul St-Pierre, Leelawati Mohapatra and K K Mohapatra

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Yayati

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No one had any idea why the last seven generations of Rayaguru men had withered away the moment they reached their prime — just like gangasiuli flowers, which fall moments after coming into bloom. Every one of them had resembled a god, but a god who was cursed. Fair, tall, eyes like lotus petals, skin the colour of molten gold; but short-lived. They had everything a mortal can aspire to — wealth, honour, respect, scholarship — but hardly any time to enjoy them. As much as people admired them, they kept to themselves, awaiting the moment the cruel wheel of Time would strike them down, like a thunderbolt, the day they turned forty-one. Not one had so far escaped his fate. Nothing, absolutely nothing — tantra, mantra, yagna, charity and feeding the poor, digging ponds, building temples, Rudra-abhishek, chanting the Mahamritunjaya mantra one million times — had done any good. Like the sharp-edged sword in the hands of Goddess Durga, untimely death hung over them. Would even one of them be lucky enough to edge past the forty-first year of his life? Why had such a terrible curse befallen this noble family?

The family members had reconciled themselves to the inevitable as if it were something natural. Early on they had come to the decision that only the eldest son would marry and raise sons, just to save the line from extinction;

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the rest would remain bachelors. Why increase the size of a tribe of short-lived men? Biswanath Rayaguru, the eldest male of the seventh generation, was nearing his forty-first year, and his six younger brothers, scattered all over the country, had remained unmarried. They returned home one by one, to await their turn; just as they had come into the world two years apart, so too they would depart it.

Although the family had no dearth of wise men, in recent years pundits, driven as much by curiosity as by disbelief, had come from far and wide to discuss the problem. Someone suggested chanting the Rudrayamal mantra, but the Rayagurus laughed that off: 'This is a family of gods; we know no old age. Death might hide in the dark and strike others when least expected, but in our case there's no uncertainty. The end is predictable, immutable — predetermined. That's what makes us invest our short lives with meaning; we use our time on earth wisely and carefully and are fully prepared for the final day when it dawns; we cross the line between life and death without the slightest fear or hesitation . . .' All this banter was open to several interpretations, but the visitors were visibly overcome by the utter helplessness of the Rayagurus, and many left with tears in their eyes.

Last year, when there remained only one year before

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the beginning of the end of the seventh generation, a new, and much worse, curse seemed to have overtaken the family: for some mysterious reason, the nine-year-old youngest son of Biswanath Rayaguru, ironically named Mrutyunjay, Conqueror of Death, began to age rapidly. His soft black hair turned grey, his limbs shriveled, he dried up and tired easily. Doctors of all kinds were called in in droves, but the boy seemed to defy all treatment. His pointy chin sprouted stubble which curled and turned white in no time, the hair over his ears fell out in clumps, revealing a shiny bald pate, the veins and sinews in his body stood out like ropes, his eyes, once so beautiful — a hallmark of the Rayagurus — lost their lustre and sank deep into their sockets, and his wrinkled skin hung loosely on his frame. It was as frightening as it was surprising: in a matter of months a young child had turned into an old man with weak, blinking eyes. What a travesty! How could a man be born old in this family? Had the accumulated old ages of seven generations of Rayagurus now assumed a human shape in this boy? Old age had kept away so long, it now seemed to be striking back with a vengeance.

How could Biswanath Rayaguru ever have anticipated that he would have to put up with this mortification as well? According to the doctors Mrutyunjay's was an incurable disease, spreading so fast that he aged fifteen

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or twenty years in a few months, and apparently the Conqueror of Death did not have much time left. What was most painful was that although the boy had become a shrivelled old man in body, in mind he remained a tender nine-year-old — playful, mischievous, given to tantrums like any pampered brat. The fuss over his sickness, however, had made him so out of sorts that he had become completely withdrawn. He stuck to his mother like a leech and often wondered why she was given to such frequent crying. What made her so sad? Sometimes he wanted to jump up and down, hop and skip, but his knees seemed to have jammed, and he'd burst into angry, helpless tears. Sometimes when they were alone, his mother would hug him, sobbing convulsively, running her fingers through his spiky, harsh, white hair. He too would burst into tears, and even as he wiped her's away he'd beg her not to cry: 'Ma, don't.' His voice would force her into silence; it had the same ring as her long-dead father-in-law's. She dreaded to look at her son. It was worse than a nightmare. Just to get over the shock she'd hurriedly take out the boy's picture book and paintbrushes, but he wouldn't be able to paint with his trembling hands and his face would pucker up and break like a mirror. She too would burst into fresh sobs and, holding his feeble hands in hers, draw him a picture, just anything. He would start to laugh and cough,

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and the sight of his toothless gums and sunken cheeks would tie her stomach into knots.

No one before Biswanath Rayaguru had been made to suffer this agony; it was an additional blow. The brother two years his junior, Birendra, who was living and working in Gujarat, rushed home when he heard about the new curse. Seeing the boy he was so moved that he could hardly speak. He felt as sad as Biswanath, which made the elder brother feel still worse: his poor brother had come home to await his turn! A head taller, with a broad chest, long muscular arms and eyes as bright as the diamond in his ring, Birendra was as handsome as Indra, king of the gods, so handsome he caught everyone's eye. Biswanath's stomach churned, his soul rose up in rebellion. He was ready to die several deaths if only Birendra could live a full life in all its glory!

That particular morning their sixty-year-old uncle paid them a sudden visit. The brothers took him to their mother. A widow for twenty years, her eyes dimmed from incessant crying, she had long since taken to living in the lower quarters, next to the worship room, with her own mother-in-law. It was from there that she ran the household — no major decision was ever taken without consulting her — and now as she greeted her brother, her voice was choked with grief.

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Biswanath seemed to revive a little in their company. These ancient people, their backs bent from age and experience, had looked after the Rayagurus through all their ups and downs, their good and bad days, their sunrises and sunsets. Would they be able to take yet another blow? Biswanath looked to them for hope. His old grandmother seemed the most tragic — an embodiment of endless grief. It was she who had seen the eclipse of not one or two but three generations. What was surprising was how a poor little woman of flesh and blood could withstand the deaths of her father-in-law, her husband and five sons without her heart exploding. Perhaps her blood had turned to water and drained away? She reminded Biswanath of the doughty survivor of the great blood-bath at the end of the Mahabharat war, with nothing left but her grief, grief she nursed as she would a baby. Sometimes too Biswanath thought that she resembled nothing more than the dusty brown earth.

The uncle slumped down on the verandah, his head bowed, a deep sigh escaping him. 'Biswanath, son,' he began. 'You're the glory of the family. You've crossed the ocean of ignorance at an age when few mortals have; you know the past and the future. But I thought I must hurry here to tell you something. It's about Mrutyunjay, whose sorry plight has plunged us all into grief. Last

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night I had a very strange dream. The very recollection of it gives me goose flesh even now. It's something I can't keep to myself. Wise and deep as you are, you'll surely make some meaning out of it.'

They all looked at the old man, whose only passion in life was to chant the Bagala mantra. What was the matter with him? How could a dream be stranger than the fate that had befallen them? Hadn't dream and reality already become one dense, undifferentiated mass?

The old man's eyes hooded over and he seemed to drift into a trance. The swath of black hair across the middle of his head stood out like a ridge between two paddy fields. The dab of holy vermilion over the sandalpaste marks across his wide forehead seemed to blink.

'It was an hour or so before the dawn,' he continued, raising his head and staring hard at them. 'I suddenly awoke to find my heart pounding. My eyes opened and I saw Mrutyunjay totter into the room, leaning heavily on a staff. He stopped in front of me. "The time has come for the Rayagurus to be freed of the curse hanging over them," he said in a staccato voice, not taking his eyes off me. "And I've come back to do it. It was I who had swallowed up their years and left them short-lived. Now I've taken birth as the one who'll live for the shortest time yet. I'll take upon myself their old age, and they

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shall be released. Pity, they don't recognize me, I'm their famous ancestor, the first Rayaguru, Parsuram Nanda." '

Everyone started. It was a familiar legend, and Parsuram Nanda, their illustrious ancestor, was one of the greatest tantric masters of his times.

'I greeted him with the utmost reverence,' the uncle went on. 'He gave me a searching look and said, "Don't forget to tell them everything you have heard just now." Then the figure began to blur and dissolve. I began to see spheres of lights, colours, flowers, flames of sacrificial fires; I heard music. My eyes seemed to widen with fear, but I knew they were shut tight. My heart raced violently. Outside, it was still dark, the night far from over, and I lay as if I were dead. As soon as the first cock crowed I leaped out of bed, washed hurriedly and reeled off a whole string of Gayatri mantras to calm myself down. Biswanath, son, I know for sure this is one dream that's going to come true. I've no doubts whatsoever that Parsuram Rayaguru has been born as Mrutyunjay to rid the family of the curse. Once the boy passes away you'll all be fine.'

The Rayagurus had stopped toying with hope. What the uncle had said might or might not come true, but more certain than that was the forty year deadline. Not that the two brothers allowed it to disturb their equanimity, but their mother couldn't take it as calmly.

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'Brother,' she said. 'Do dreams ever come true? Will the vile curse really lift? I wonder! Not until I see it with my own eyes will I be able to bring myself to believe it. I'm surprised you can set store by a dream.'

'Listen, Sulakshana,' her brother said. 'This dream will come true, that is certain. It was no ordinary dream and brought back to mind what we used to hear about Parsuram Rayaguru when we were kids. Once you connect the two you'll be as certain as I am. Do you know how Parsuram Nanda came to be known as Parsuram Rayaguru?

'Well, he came here as a chakulia panda, a wandering beggar Brahmin, with a wife and five children in tow, all dying of hunger. By day he scoured the neighbouring villages, passing his begging bowl around; by night he worshipped Goddess Chandi. He spent his very first night here under a tree overlooking the bathing ghat of the river which now bears his name. Next morning he began to build a mud hut. Life was hard. One Tuesday, a new moon day, the whole family — famished since morning; there was nothing, absolutely nothing to eat — eagerly awaited his return. The children had collected some herbs and leaves to cook together, and dry twigs and sticks to build a fire; all they were waiting for was a handful of rice to make a bowl of porridge.

'Parsuram returned after dark. Tied securely in one end

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of his towel were a meagre collection of broken rice, a stick of red sandalwood, vermilion, incense, a small bottle of sesame oil, an earthen lamp, a blood-red hibiscus and a few other articles of worship.

'His wife flew into a rage. "Has the goddess ever given you a good, hot, freshly-cooked meal?" she screamed at him. "To hell with your reputation as a tantric! You have no clothes on your back, not even the simplest meal in your stomach! To hell with your useless goddess who roams the cremation grounds stark naked! Where has a lifetime of chanting mantras and singing the praises of the goddess got you? What benefits have all your penance and austerities brought you? Go throw your palm-leaf manuscripts into the river. Better to plant the front yard with vegetables that our children can eat than to go on with such useless efforts. And take away these articles of worship before I gather them up and set fire to the whole lot."

'Blind with fury, Parsuram Nanda gave her half the rice he had collected for the goddess and angrily made his way to the dry riverbed to begin his evening invocations. His angry voice rose, loud and booming, and the mantras scattered like thunderbolts. The air trembled, the earth shook.

Inside the hut, his petrified wife and children huddled together, pretending to be asleep. Parsuram went on

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invoking the goddess. Some chanting it was — powerful enough to set any mortal's navel jumping, enough to make him break out in a cold sweat. His wife had never heard him belt out the mantras with such fury and vehemence. Chilled to the marrow, she peeped out and saw the fire blazing on the riverbed and her husband provoking it by throwing handfuls of samagri into it. The fire had turned blood red. "Ugra Chandike!" he was shouting. "Traymbake, Dhumrakshi, Kalabhujangamalini, Jwalamukhi, Yogini, Yogamaya! Appear before me! Release me from this unbearable burden of poverty! Take away my misery. I can bear it no longer."

'His wife and children could hear every word. The flames became fiercer, the tongues seemed to leap right up to the dome of the sky and disappear among the stars. Parsuram's voice rose to a crescendo; his chanting became harsher, more urgent and insistent. He squatted on his haunches, his knees tucked under him. He cupped his palms and seemed to drink from them. After a while he rose, a lighted wick in one hand and a bowl of sesame oil in the other, and walked back to his hut. His eyes burned like red-hot embers, his body emitted waves of heat the colour of molten gold. His wife and children nearly died of fright.

'Parsuram called out to them: "Come out all you hungry, miserable, godforsaken lot! Come on out, all

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you who are hiding in the hut! Mother Goddess is showering her mercy, her bounty on us — come and lap it up. Everything — wealth, fame, intelligence, knowledge, wisdom, power, glory — everything will be ours for the asking."

'His children, half-dead from hunger and fright, spilled out, jostling each other, and sat down on the narrow porch in a single file. Parsuram gave them crumbs of consecrated food. "The shadow of poverty will never touch this family again."

'Then, turning, he left for the cremation ground. When he returned in the small hours, he was glowing like the morning sun. Barely had an hour passed when the king's messenger arrived with an invitation from the royal court. He was appointed the chief court priest, the Rayaguru, that same day. Fame, honour, and wealth came pouring in.

'Twenty-five years later his eldest son dropped dead just when he turned forty-one. One by one the others followed suit. Parsuram Rayaguru went into shock. He tried everything, but the blessing — or the curse, whatever you want to call it — he had received through his angry invocations couldn't be undone. Heavenly retribution couldn't be avoided. In exchange for wealth and fame, Parsuram had offered the goddess the longevity of his progeny, and what mortal could alter

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that pact? Despite his material prosperity, prestige and power, Parsuram Rayaguru remained a very, very sad man until his final breath. His eldest grandson was nearing forty when death finally came to the old man.

'His great-grandsons were just as illustrious, and the family became the talk of the town. It is said the old man did not have the heart to see his grandsons die and so willed himself to death. Shortly before he breathed his last, he called the eldest grandson to his bedside and confided to him, 'Child, although the Goddess has showered blessings on the Rayaguru family, not one of you will ever be able to enjoy them for any length of time. All of you will drop dead the day you complete forty years. The fault is all mine, and I'll have to make amends for it. I'll be born again into this family and reverse the process. Until then, my child, humour the goddess, don't ever neglect worship. Always carry it out with the utmost reverence. I'll be born into this family again, I'll . . ." These were his last words. Who are we to disbelieve it, or to dismiss it as a myth? I'm convinced he has indeed been reborn as Mrutyunjay. He's come back to reverse the curse of the early death of the males of this family. You should rejoice that the curse that's dogged the family so long is about be lifted.'

Biswanath's wife pushed the door open just then and walked into the courtyard, leading Mrutyunjay by the

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hand. How thin and emaciated the lovely young woman had become! And how dark! Her hair was unkempt, her sari threadbare and dirty. The boy wore a dhoti in the typical manner of the Brahmins, with a towel around his shoulders and lines of red sandalpaste across his narrow forehead. Leaning on his staff, he looked very much like a ripe old man of eighty.

'He wanted to play at being the great-great-grandfather,' Biswanath's wife offered by way of explanation. 'It was his own idea to dress up like this.'

'Yes, I'm the great-great-grandfather,' the boy declaimed theatrically. 'The first known ancestor.' He struck the staff on the ground and stared at them.

They couldn't help but stare back.

Flustered, the boy ducked behind his mother, pulling the end of her sari over his face.

Like puppets, the grand uncle, uncle, father and grandmother all kneeled down around him. With his bird-like ribcage, chin of stubble and snow-white shock of hair, the boy bore an uncanny resemblance to the ancestor they had just been talking about.

'Of course you're the first known ancestor! Who said you aren't?' Biswanath's uncle said humbly. 'Although you've chosen to appear in disguise, we all know you're Parsuram Nanda and have come back to rid the family of the curse.'

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Mrutyunjay peeped shyly from behind his mother and began to laugh until it turned into a fit of coughing.

'Enough is enough, my child,' his mother said. 'Don't tire yourself out. Let's go back and see what that naughty little black horse with the red-faced monkey dangling from its belly is up to. You wanted to take a ride, didn't you?'

Biswanath's uncle looked scandalized. Who did the woman think she was talking to — some small child keen on getting back on his rocking horse? 'Listen, daughter,' he said. 'The person you're taking as your little child is really the founding ancestor of this family. The first Rayaguru, the famous Parsuram Rayaguru himself. And he's come to undo the curse of untimely death that has blighted this family. That's why he himself has become prematurely old. He will soon pass away.'

'Don't utter such horrible words!' cried Biswanath's wife, gathering the child in her arms. 'He isn't a burden on anyone, is he? Why should anyone wish him ill? The poor dear has become a bag of bones because some miserable witch has cast an evil spell on him, but I'm sure he'll get well soon.'

They remained silent.

She became hysterical. 'I know it. I know how indifferent you all have become. The poor child's plight doesn't move you any longer. Not one of you has

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bothered to find out why a tender thing of ten has started to wither away, why a bud has begun to droop before it could bloom. But I, who carried him inside me, know. I know the sorrow, the sorrow I've had to carry on my head like a slab of stone. But why should that matter to you? Why must you wish my child ill? Haven't you seen too many untimely deaths in this family to be so eager to sacrifice even this little waif?'

Her anguish swept over them like floodwaters.

'That's just it,' Biswanath's mother said. 'When have dreams ever come true, brother? How could this little child be Parsuram Rayaguru? And why should our illustrious ancestor take pity on us when not even the gods do? My Biswanath is already four months into his fortieth year. Where's the goddess to whom Parsuram Rayaguru prayed? How I wish she'd take me in lieu of my son! Hasn't she had enough after consuming six generations? How I wish I could die now and not prolong my suffering a moment longer!' She rushed up the porch steps, sobbing and screaming.

Biswanath rose and went to his son. Running his hand over the boy's head, he took Mrutyunjay's tiny, withered hand in his and walked him slowly across the courtyard.

Birendra, his head down, followed them.

Biswanath's wife stared at her son and husband. What an odd pair they made!

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'That's right,' Biswanath remarked. 'Why should a father outlive his child? It always should be the other way round.' He still had his hand on the white-haired head of the boy as if he was bestowing blessings on the little one, donating him the remaining years of his own life.

His quiet words made his wife shudder.

That day Biswanath spent a long time with his son. At dinner, when his wife made the boy sit on her lap and stuffed balls of rice and lentil into his reluctant mouth, he watched in deep anguish. This bony little old man was his son, he had to repeatedly remind himself, his disease of aging rapidly was deadly; soon he'd be gone.

His wife's face was streaked with bitter tears and she wouldn't raise her head to look at her husband. He was already four months past his thirty-ninth year. Why couldn't she predecease her husband and son? What cruel god had ordained such a terrible fate for her? Not only would the son die soon, she would become a widow too! What satisfaction could any god get from that? The memories of her life before her marriage came crowding into her mind — scraps of memories of virginal days, of the games of kings and queens.

Mrutyunjay dropped asleep in the middle of the meal, just as old people sometimes do.

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Biswanath wouldn't leave his wife's side. When was the last time they had sat together like this? She had forgotten what it felt like to nestle against the man who was everything to her — husband, father, mother, brother, friend, the only treasure in this life and hereafter. She burst into sobs as much out of sorrow as out of an aching love for him, as he enveloped her like a warm cocoon. Then suddenly she awoke from her reverie, her heart beating wildly. Why was he being so sweet? Was he trying to bid her goodbye? Was it his way of preparing her for the end? She looked up at him and, finding his eyes brimming with tears, broke down. 'No, no,' she shrieked. 'No, it can't be.'

Biswanath looked at the void ahead of him, the tears already dry on his cheeks. His son slept on peacefully like an eighty-year-old man.

He put his hand under his wife's chin and lifted her head. 'So long, my dear,' he said with a wan smile, rising to his feet.

Watching his receding figure, his wife wondered who he resembled most — a god living out a curse, or a lotus in bloom?

It was already late and the earth and the sky seemed awash with tears; the house was deathly quiet. Her gaze lingered on her son. Who was this old man sleeping in bed? The veins on his neck were swollen, his shoulder

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blades jutted out like wings, and his ribs stood out in bold relief. How could he be her ten-year-old son? Where had her little one gone, he who was as fair as a champak, with eyes like shining stars and whose sweet laughter had once filled the house? Where was that lovely little creature, her youngest and favourite child?

She paced the room like a madwoman, a lamp in hand, returning to the bed again and again to watch her sleeping son. 'No, this can't be my son! My son's dead and gone. The cruel goddess has consumed him. Yes, it was she who consumed him. The first Rayaguru sacrificed him at her altar even before he was born.' She sank to the ground.

Mrutyunjay died the next day.

A perfectly natural end, said the doctor. Death due to extreme old age.

Biswanath Rayaguru is now almost forty-five. His uncle never misses an opportunity to tell whoever's willing to listen that Biswanath could never have lived a second beyond his forty-first year had Parsuram Rayaguru not taken rebirth as Mrutyunjay and not wiped out the curse.

Mrutyunjay's death anniversary is observed during Durgapuja in the month of Ashwin, Biswanath himself performing all the rites as he would for a beloved ancestor. Talk of miracles!

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The Emperor

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When he returned home, his wife said, 'Someone came by looking for you a short while ago, just after you went out for your walk . . .'

'What did he look like?'

'I didn't manage to get a good look at him,' she replied. 'Shall I get you a cup of tea?'

His wife seized the chance to get away, and he was overcome by the desire to close his eyes for a long time. His face, pinched up from melancholy, took on a far-away look. The voice declaimed: *Fools! Nincompoops! How on earth can a man attain victory if the wheels of his chariot sink into the mud at the height of battle! There are strategies to chalk out, campaigns to command, countries to conquer, and when you're set to do all that and more the very ground on which you stand starts to give way!*

'Sir!'

He opened his eyes a crack and saw two young boys, thin and starry-eyed, entering the room. His reverie interrupted, he stared at them with evident displeasure.

'This is the second time since yesterday that we've come to see you, sir,' the boys said. 'If you turn us down we'll knock our heads against this wall.'

He remained silent.

'You must agree to take the role of the emperor in

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our play *Swargadwar*. Nobody else can do justice to it. So what if you do look a little old and feeble? A touch of make-up and you'll look better than a real emperor. You've always played the emperor and you will play him one more time.'

He remained silent.

'We simply refuse to take no as an answer. The handbills have already been distributed.'

Who are these fellows? He wondered, straightening himself with a sigh. His neck looked longer than before. The furrows on his broad forehead and chin gave his face the look of an inverted triangle that had been squeezed. Everything had withered away: the imperious hauteur, the bushy eyebrows, the big brooding eyes, the Grecian nose; everything was gone. The sweat on his unshaven face looked like the churned muddy waters of a ploughed paddy field, and his face was pockmarked with the footprints of nameless dark monsters. The gaping holes, the furrows, the stubble. Where had the famous face gone? He looked up.

'So it's all arranged, sir!' the boys cried out together. 'We'd better run along now.'

His eyes closed. Reflections rose on the life-size mirror of the auditorium: *the haughty, swaggering Karna in his red robe, golden waistband, and heavy crown, with gilded pendants hanging from his neck like rising suns; the strap-*

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ping Kartyavirya guffawing uproariously; Prataparudra, Mukundadev, Kharavela in exquisite dresses, with gold necklaces and glittering armbands, flinging their glorious arms about; the puny, deferential make-up man tiptoeing in and out of the greenroom, touching up an eyebrow one minute and a sideburn the next . . . The stage is flooded with light. There the sun rises; there night sets in; there the lion growls, setting the papier mache mountains and the cardboard fortresses atremble. The tumultuous sea of the enthralled audience stretches from the mouth of the cave to the deep night sky — every spectator a pair of wide unblinking eyes, a pair of cocked ears. Oh, the festival of applause! The sea rolls with joy, the sky showers petals, and someone climbs on to the stage to pin a gold medal on the emperor's vast chest. The emperor does not deign to bow his head in acknowledgement, his crown touching the sky . . .

'Here's your tea.' His wife interrupted his daydream. 'Who were those boys?'

'What-er-who?' he fumbled for words. 'I don't know.'

'What did they want?'

'Weren't they telling me something — what was it?' He lifted the cup *gracefully*, as if picking up a bouquet. 'Oh yes, they wanted me to play the role of the emperor in their play *Swargadwar*.' Fine, you find me a crown and I'll give you an emperor as good as they come. Age does not put an end to class. He lifted his cup and took an-

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other sip. That's how Mukundadev took his goblet of wine from the hands of a bewitching dancing girl. His mind wandered again: foggy dreams, thin as swirls of mist, filled the still, upturned eyes of a sleepy man.

From her experience of twenty-five years as his wife she realized he had already drifted off to another world. She waited, drank her tea, looked out, and waited. Hadn't she waited like this, night after night? The nights were so still that if a straw fell it could be mistaken for a winnowing fan. A sudden gust of wind, and the front door would creak as ominously as her heart. Sometimes, on the thatched roof a cat would pounce on a mouse; a battle would ensue and blood would be spilled. She would hear a squeaking lump of flesh being torn to shreds. She would flinch and cover herself with a blanket, her nerves in tatters: so this is what life is for a mouse! Strange fears and sadness would grip her. In the kitchen the egg curry stayed on the stove and, outside, the dew fell in drops. In the deafening stillness of the night, she throbbed with anticipation. The darkness was alive with the smell of the new mosquito curtain. And then it was gone, as a strange perfume wafted in from god knows where. She felt somebody was stealthily walking around the bed, closing in on her. Goose-bumps rose all over her body. The sounds of conversations came floating in from afar, the actors returning from the rehearsal.

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The footsteps stopped near the front door. A thick, soft knock. No mischief of the breeze this time. She would hurry out of bed, light the lamp and open the door with a yawn, feigning she had just awakened from a long sleep. The emperor would stride in, declaiming his dialogues in his deep baritone, and sit down to a cold, dull dinner of rice and egg curry as though it was a wonderful banquet. Who knew how late it was.

She sighed, and the curtain fell. The glowing stage limped back to darkness, and the lonely old couple drank their tepid tea. She wanted to begin a conversation, anything to hold his attention, but didn't know how. The minutes ticked away, and in the disquieting silence the curtain lifted once again. Hectic preparations were afoot in the greenroom.

How I'd love to straighten out some of these fellows, he thought. Why doesn't someone show these Kalamandir fools the door? Who brought them here? Their props are filthy, the curtains tattered and discoloured and they smell to high heavens. These costumes have never been washed and reek of a thousand different odours of sweat; they're crumpled and the brocade is coming off. How can anyone put on such clothes and keep his head? But of course the costume the other night was the very worst — it was crawling with ants. Luckily, there was time to take it off and put on another. With all those ants biting me, what would have happened to me on

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stage?

His eyes opened abruptly, dilating in anger.

His wife took the cups and walked off.

His eyes closed. *Were the Royal Painters people any better? First-rate crooks! And that seedy-looking dwarf of a manager — how he would giggle at every silly word of yours! Never was there a greater giggler. Nor anyone more glib. He could charm the birds out of the trees. But to give the devil his due, he had the best costumes. His emperor costumes were magnificent, simply magnificent. But where did that son of a bitch of a manager get that foul-smelling glue to stick on the emperor's moustache? It was a lovely prim moustache twirling divinely at the ends. But the stink was so awful he had to hold his nose. Once a damn fine scene was nearly ruined because of it. Of course the audience didn't catch on; maybe they thought he had improvised this mannerism, this royal habit of stroking the moustache at every second word. Little did they know that the poor emperor was in a cold sweat. His voice sounded so hollow to his own ears that it hurt him. He couldn't tell people about the glue, could he? He would happily have murdered the manager.* He shook in anger and scowled as if he was going to send everyone to the gallows.

As she washed the cups in the kitchen sink, his wife fell to thinking. Nobody had ever understood the full extent of her husband's histrionics. Nor would anyone

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ever. The time for that had passed. The time had passed for a great many things besides: a house of their own, good clothes, good food. The only silver lining was that their two children had turned out well after all. Mamuni had married an army officer and now lived in Darjeeling, Babuni had got a good job and moved to Bombay. That's what the world's like — you can't latch on to the children all the time. How nice it would be to go on a pilgrimage now, just the two of us, husband and wife! How her heart yearned to step outside the four walls of the house! But she knew that was just a pipe dream. Her husband was gravely ill and deteriorating day by day. His rock-like muscles had melted away and the big hulk of a man was already a bag of bones.

The emperor sat stock-still, lost in his dream. Craning his neck, he glowered angrily. Already on some invisible execution ground, rows of nondescript make-up men and managers were climbing the scaffold at his command. How he had wanted to buy his own costumes, swords, wigs and beads, which nobody else would use! He had made plans to get them from Calcutta, but Calcutta always remained a far off place. He had plans to record his famous declamations for posterity. He had plans to go on the air. Kartyavirya's bellows would have rattled the ribs of the radio sets. From the burgeoning void of the lonely cave a stormy voice rang out: 'Noth-

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ing achieved! Nothing at all!' The emperor's head drooped. His eyes watered. Hurriedly the old actor retreated into his drawing room, to the safety of its wicker chairs, old cotton cushions, and odour of familiarity.

The voice from the cave chased him.

He suddenly remembered Radharani, the actress who had played the role of the queens in most of the productions. She was every inch a queen, a stunning beauty. And when she played Padmavati how provocatively her silk sari would climb up her slim legs. What a wonderful lilt she had to her voice and how sweetly she sang! He had wanted to learn to sing, but the guru he went to said it was too late in the day. He had tried hard but could not go beyond the seven notes. He had wanted to be a sculptor and chisel incredibly beautiful shapes and forms out of rock; he had wanted to be a painter and create vivid dreams in colour on canvasses as large as the wall. The slabs of stone ended up as steps around the well; termites got at the unpainted canvasses; the tubes of paint dried up and hardened to stone.

The voice from the cave rose to a shrill crescendo: 'Nothing achieved! Nothing at all!'

The emperor sank into his chair — his neck, spine, ribs, hands, legs, all in a sad heap, like an old sack filled with the broken coloured glass of shattered dreams.

The front door creaked.

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His wife hurried back into the drawing room. 'It might be that man again,' she said.

'Which man?'

'The one who was looking for you.'

Would her husband, a full six feet and two inches, get to his feet to receive the visitor? she wondered. Would he use the occasion to stretch his limbs? But he continued to sit like a shrunken lump, even as Beni Madhav Samant, his friend, strode in. A forest contractor, Beni Madhav, was a jovial, fun-loving man.

Beni Madhav's sudden appearance triggered off an unpleasant reaction: Why, I never thought Beni could be so mean! Just because he's lent me some two or three hundred rupees, here he comes barging in. Maybe the tight fist has come to remind me about it.

'Hey, old fellow," Beni Madhav said. 'I hope nothing's the matter with you. God knows I've come running all the way. Didn't even stop to have tea.' He turned to her. 'Bhauja, do me a favour and make me a steaming hot cup. But first listen to what I have to say. You remember the patch of sal forest, don't you — that dark, eerie place? Damn it, I've never been able to walk past it without trepidation. Ever since I was a child. This evening, you know what happened — I was returning from work . . ."

Bloody skit! He smiled. A load lifted off his chest. Beni isn't here to ask for his money; he's afraid of walk-

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ing past a ragged cluster of trees. Calls it a forest. Hah!

'Give me your ears, Bhauja and brother, will you?' Beni Madhav raised his voice. 'It was simply incredible. A fellow materialized from nowhere and stood in my path.'

'Who?'

'Someone who's been looking for you.'

'A short, slovenly man?' she enquired.

'Why, yes! But how did you know?'

'He was here this afternoon and said he'd come back.'

A brief silence, heavy as a fog, hung over the room.

'Oh forget it, Beni,' said the old actor. 'If he's looking for me, he knows where to find me. Don't you find there's a chill in the air?'

'A chill in the air?' Beni Madhav was surprised. 'It's so hot and sultry. You're feeling cold, huh?' He turned to his friend's wife. 'Bhauja, get the old fellow a sheet. Let him wrap himself up in it.'

The front door opened again with a creak. Beni Madhav started and stole a glance at his friend's wife. 'Perhaps it's that man.'

Old doctor Dhanurdhar swept into the room and flopped down onto a chair. The chair groaned.

'What's the matter with you?' the doctor enquired, looking at the actor. 'Are you ill?'

The old actor eyed Dhanurdhar without a word. So

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you've come to collect your fees, huh? How I know you! Come out with it and end the suspense.

'Why have you wrapped yourself in a sheet? It's so hot. Come, give me your hand. Let me feel your pulse. Never mind, that can wait. First let me tell you about the funny fellow I met on my way here. He scared the life out of me. Why was he lurking about under a tree like a ghost? He suddenly rushed out and planted himself in front of me. A short, unkempt, sheepish-looking man. And he enquired . . . he wanted to know where to find you. I don't know why he's looking for you so desperately. He sure gave me a jolt. I couldn't get here fast enough to tell you. Now, if you'll give me your hand.'

The doctor turned to Beni Madhav Samant. 'Do you see, Samant, how this elephant of a man has been reduced to skin and bones!' Turning to the actor, he continued, 'Do you have to keep yourself covered and sweat buckets for nothing? You don't have a fever! Come over to the bed and let me examine you properly. You know something, your obsession for the stage has done you in. Keeping late hours, taking meals at odd times and drinking god knows how many cups of tea a day — they've taken their toll.'

There was a brief silence. The old actor's big brooding eyes wore a far-away look. 'Get me the box of medals, will you?' he asked his wife.

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She brought the box, wiping the glass lid with the end of her sari. There were ten rows of gold and silver medals pinned to a velvet cloth — ten twinkling medals in all the rows but one, the ninety-nine medals shining like stars. He had worn everyone of these on his proud chest amidst deafening applause under blinding flood-lights. Just one more and there would have been a hundred and his sky would have been filled from end to end.

All eyes inevitably rested on the vacant space in the last row, and a feeling of acute discomfort permeated the air.

'You realize, don't you, doctor,' said Beni Madhav, 'that's he's a rare talent in this land.'

The doctor fiddled with his stethoscope, a scowl on his face. 'You don't feel well, do you?' he enquired, looking at the patient.

There was a knock on the door and they all started. The door opened and the actor's grandson Jhampu, his daughter's son, parted the curtains and skipped in. The rapid patter of his tiny feet brought a sense of relief.

'Back so soon from your lessons?' Jhampu's grandmother asked. 'The tutor didn't show up or what?'

Jhampu said nothing. He went straight to his grandfather and looked at him intently. Then he took his arithmetic book from his bag and said, 'Look, grandpa, there's

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one sum even the tutor couldn't solve. I told him my grandpa could. You bring any sum and he'll solve it. It's not for nothing that his pictures are in the history books!'

Suddenly everyone grew restive. A lump rose in the old actor's throat. Stretched out on the bed, he whispered hoarsely: 'Turn back, Queen Mother, go back. Mother of the Pandavas, go away. Consign me to oblivion. I'm but the offspring of a lowly charioteer. Humiliation, defeat and death are in store for me. Mother, please go away . . ." *The audience held its breath. Tears glistened in every eye. The gaslights sputtered and hissed. The sound of a falling straw could be mistaken for a winnowing fan* . . . A wan smile creased the old actor's face and tears welled up in his eyes. Who's that dwarfish, seedy-looking man waiting in the wings? Why is he grinning like the manager of the Royal Painters?

'Grandpa,' said Jhampu. 'I've got a medal for you.' He took out a tin badge distributed for Army Day and pinned it on his grandfather's chest.

The old actor was overwhelmed. The seas roared. There were peals of thunder and flashes of lightning. A tumultuous commotion. The sky opened up. The emperor stood in the wings. The mighty Karna, clad in hibiscus-red robes, glowed like the fiery sun. A small, seedy-looking man stood beside him, holding him by his little finger, ready to take him backstage. The audience would

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see the emperor no more.

Who are these people pulling and tugging at the old white sheet? Why are they doing that? What are they looking for in the folds and wrinkles of an old dress? Who are they looking for?

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The Rivals

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I, Bhanu Singh, am no chicken; I don't scare easily. But I'm not given to bravado either: I don't talk big to hide my fear, unlike some people I know, even as their tails are tucked between their legs. Don't think I haven't had my fights. Far from it. In fact, I've had more than my fair share. I've fought like hell, and I'll fight again if I have to. All the same, I'd better confess right away to the fear that stole over me the moment I laid eyes on *him.* To tell you the truth, the fear was so palpable that it made me look over my shoulder again and again the rest of that evening; and since then, it's been weighing on my mind like a rock. Though it's rare that I'm frightened by things living or dead, this would be really tough to laugh off. If I did, it'd only be hollow pretence, and I, Bhanu Singh, am not the type to duck behind a lie. Whatever I am I'm not a bloody coward!

How well I remember that evening; it remains etched in my mind. I was still on the dias, with bouquets and garlands heaped in front of me. My praises had been sung, the election meeting was over, and the large audience had dispersed for the time being — they'd gather after dinner to watch the daskathia performance — and only a few hundred people were still milling around. The bright gaslights had banished the darkness

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to the fringes of the meeting ground. Just as I was relaxing like a Moghul emperor in his courtroom — more and more fragrant with every paan I reached for, a Bhagu special, costing a rupee, no less — pleased as punch with myself, my imperious glance caught a glimpse of the fellow. He stood leaning against a bamboo pole, his hands behind his back as if tied with a silk handkerchief; he was wearing a batik lungi and a short-sleeved vest. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. It was all there: his soft drooping moustache, his deep brooding eyes, his sharp angular face half-hidden under a red-and-white piece of material. Was it the cloth, resembling a dice-board, that made the fellow so uncanny? How the hell could it be Dukhia, Dukhishyam? And what scores did he have to settle with me after fifteen years?

But I couldn't gather enough courage to lift my head and take another look at him. Don't know whether it was the tobacco that did it, but I felt my head swim, and I broke into a cold sweat. I could barely make it to my car parked close-by, the solicitous throng parting before me like the sea. I remember my head was suddenly so heavy that it drooped like a sunflower on its stem.

That was Friday. I cancelled all my programmes right through to Tuesday and returned home. Somewhere along the way the driver stopped for tea; he needed it to keep from falling asleep. I was no less drowsy and

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would have loved a steaming hot cup myself, but I dared not step out of the safe cocoon of the car. The driver had parked it beside a lamp-post, and I started when someone came lumbering up from behind and pushed his face in through the window. My heart leaped, the tiny little sparrow of sleep flew from my eyes, and I stared, eyes widening with fear, at the red-and-white shawl. Mercifully, it turned out to be a bloody bearded Sikh. I can't for the life of me recollect what he said or how I responded. All I remember is his eyes blazed like embers and he was frothing at the mouth. My driver returned. The Sikh walked off with a sinister laugh. Perhaps he was drunk, or had had a row with my project secretary or someone or other, or somebody had just rubbed him the wrong way; whatever! At another time I wouldn't have bothered about it. But why had he covered his head with a red-and-white shawl? Do most Sikhs do that? Nothing surprising in that? Maybe. But I had had one hell of a fright all the same. The rest of the journey I couldn't close my eyes; I sat staring straight ahead, without blinking. Every tree we drove past seemed a sharp angular face watching me with brooding eyes, and a cloth around it reaching down to its roots, as our car rushed headlong into the dark stretching from the north to an unchartered south.

I felt infinitely better when morning came. The fog of

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fear seemed to have dissipated with the darkness. In broad daylight the fright caused by seeing someone who resembled Dukhia had disappeared, and after bath and breakfast I was my old self again, almost. To hell with it, I thought, I can't possibly let a silly hallucination destroy my world. Yes, I'm sure it'd been just an optical illusion. All in the mind, a matter of how you look at it — to some the sky is just the sky, to others it's the heavens.

Dukhishyam was long dead and gone. Dead for fifteen years. Surely he hadn't been living under the waters of the Biluakhai all this time and suddenly resurfaced because he found himself overwhelmed with love for me! I ran a finger over my moustache, looked at the reassuring colours of my home, tested the softness of the carpet on the floor. Outside, the usual crowd of favour-seekers had gathered. A little money was all one needed to buy up this scums, these lowlifes.

That morning I did a bit of body-shopping too. The wretches had queued right up to my doorstep from the main road. Out in the sun. All seekers of my favour, all eager to do my bidding. Pleased, I sat glancing over the pressing crowd. So many different faces, such different clothes. After doling out a little money to someone who gave me a sob story I raised my head and suddenly noticed a man with a red-and-white cloth wrapped around his head pushing past the gate. In the clean

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morning light the red-and-white squares seemed ablaze. Had Dukhia followed me here? To stretch his hands out before me? To beg? My gut churned. A little less self-control and I'd have made a fool of myself by screaming. I crooked a finger at a hanger-on. 'Find that fellow with the red-and-white cloth on his head,' I said. 'That fellow, there! Hurry, he's trying to slip away.' This inevitably led to a commotion. The first fellow relayed my order to a second and the second to a third and so on until the cacophony was deafening: 'Catch him! Catch the man with the red-and-white cloth! Grab him! Don't let him slip away!' The poor fellow who was finally dragged into my presence turned out to be our regular meat supplier, Hamid Mian, the bearded butcher. Clad in a blue lungi and a shirt, he had just brought the day's supply of meat to my kitchen.

I flew into a rage and for no reason at all vented my anger on everyone around, and then stormed off to my room. Sinking into a sofa in a helpless heap, I wondered: What the hell's the matter? Why am I so distraught? What's making me shake and tremble? Is it Dukhishyam, the bastard who always got the better of me for five and thirty years, whom I never beat no matter how hard I tried? He was always ahead of me, his clean pair of heels were all I saw. I thought I had annihilated that monster, but then he was the one who had always

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ignited me, kindled my fire, spurred me on — without him I couldn't have taken on all the rest and defeated them, hundreds and thousands of them, beat them at their game, and not by inches but by miles. Dukhishyam, Dukhia — my intimate enemy, my eternal friend, my intoxicant, my scourge. I gave him a hard fight; he often looked over his shoulder afraid I might catch up or overtake him. Like two black stallions we stomped all over the earth. The rest were merely breathless spectators; they never caught on why we two always fought and why sometimes we made peace.

Come to think of it, Dukhia was more scared of me than I of him. I had nothing but scorn for him. We were in the same class in school; we wrestled on the same turf. He never said die; neither did I. Perhaps I'd have given it all up if only once I'd come first in the exams. Maybe that would have made him give it all up too. But we were born rivals, and there was no way we could forget our rivalry for long. I came from a backwoods village and had legions of supporters; it's quite another thing that they never took my true measure. Dukhia was from the town, and had his horde of camp-followers; he was their uncrowned king. Our rivalry was the stuff of legend, and how we went at it! We tamed horses, climbed trees, swam across swollen rivers, raced motorcycles, wrote essays, did complicated calculations, played parts

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on the stage. Every competition was war, full-blown war, no quarter given and none expected. Not until the very end could anyone tell who was going to win. There was no end to the suspense and consternation I caused in my rival's camp: where did a village-boy learn to beat the townies at their own games? Just as there was no end to my shock when town-boy Dukhia beat me at village sports. Like swimming, for example. And he'd beat me by a lap. I fought on like a lion, but it slowly dawned on me that I'd never get the best of him. He was one demon of a fighter, burning like a red-hot ember, going full out. He knew no one could beat him, did he? Oh Dukhia, my intimate enemy, my fiendish friend. I had vowed to drink his blood, and I remained thirsty.

Crooked Arm Bhagia, one of those in my camp, had once proposed a solution: he would place a steel wire across Dukhia's path so that the fellow'd trip and break a leg or two: that'd be the end of the his exploits in athletics and all the first prizes would be mine. Bhagia was all smiles, perhaps pleased with himself for the brilliant suggestion he had whispered in my ear. I was suddenly afraid I'd catch fire, so terrible was my rage. I beat Bhagia to a bloody pulp. Thank God people intervened otherwise that would have been the end of poor Crooked Arm. Didn't I wish Dukhia to trip and break his legs? Hell, I wished him dead, but who would I have

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to fight if he were dead or hurt? Fox-faced Crooked Arm Bhagia and the like? Who would there be left to try and defeat? So I made it clear to my cronies once and for all: lay off Dukhia, let no one play a mean cowardly trick on him. My Dukhia — my soul mate. He and I were attached together by the same thread. The passion which ruled me, which gave meaning to my life, was that someday I'd defeat Dukhia and leave him behind. So if people thought of eliminating one of us let them get rid of me rather than him, not Dukhia, not my Dukhia. I wanted to be the one to chew him alive, flesh and blood, body and soul. There. That's the unvarnished truth. I won't mince my words.

One time in the school hostel I came down with a fever. My body seemed to be burning; I was weak. But who cared? Then I heard a familiar voice and peered out from under the blanket. Dukhia was sitting on the edge of the bed. He with his deep brooding eyes, sharp angular face. My heart beat wildly, my breath became quicker, my nostrils distended. He held my hand in his lap, gently stroking it. I wanted to snatch it away but couldn't. Hot tears dripped from the end of my nose.

He sat there for a long time, putting cold compresses on my forehead. The steam within me seemed to turn to water and drip out, and I dozed off. For how long? How long had he been caring for me? And why? Why

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didn't he pour a drop of poison into my medicine? How had he overcome his sense of rivalry? By caring for his enemy he had gained further advantage over me! My greatest enemy, he had outdone me in sympathy too.

'Bhanu,' he said. 'The fever will go down only if you will it to. Surely an ordinary fever can't get the better of you! Why, nothing ever happens to me — fevers simply keep their distance!' That got my goat. So he had come to brag about being a better fever-fighter than me! I sat up on the bed, bolt upright. He wanted me to lie down but didn't press the point. I leaned against the wall, fixing him with a cold stare. How I hated him!

He lowered his brooding eyes, as he always did. His shyness was quite endearing. 'Bhanu,' he said softly, his lilting voice pure honey as ever. 'I came to tell you something. Will you believe me?' How I longed to make-believe he was my brother, born of the same mother. 'Bhanu, believe it or not, I've always wanted to lose to you. At least once.'

I started. My nostrils flared. I tucked my legs under me and started swaying like a cobra to the snake-charmer's flute. Dukhia got the message.

'But it's impossible for me to lose just so you can win. That would be unfair to you. I must fight like the devil as I always do and wait for someone to pin me to the mat. There must be someone out there who can do that.

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Believe me, Bhanu, I can feel it in my bones — that someone is you. I'm dying to taste the bitterness of defeat, if only just once. I want to experience how it feels to claw my way back into the fight, to rally. Bhanu, tell me, how does it feel?'

My eyes sparked fire. Flames flew out of my nostrils. My hands knotted into fists. What cheek! He who had turned all my victories into defeats, who had always beaten me, was now asking how it felt to lose! I ought to have throttled him, burnt him to ashes — I would've been capable of it at that moment.

We finished school, got into the same college, and our fights continued. How many? One hundred? Maybe more. But Dukhia always came out ahead. The rest of the bunch lagged miles and miles behind. While we fought like royalty for the whole sky, the rest fought for a few measly inches on the ground; we were like two flaming rockets soaring above everyone else. Defeat became my staple. I got used to it, just as it seemed natural for Dukhia to remain the best, only the best.

In due course we finished college. Neither he nor I looked for a job. No need to do that. I set up a company into which I poured ten lakh rupees; in five years it was worth a crore. I was in the money. Only five years in business and already I had no competitors. Sometimes,

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however, my heart would skip a beat: what if Dukhia had gone into the same line? Would he have made two crore against my one? Like someone in love I found myself beginning to long for the very person who always made me drink from the bitter cup of defeat. I longed to feast my eyes on him too. God, he was even a year and a half older than me; he'd always remain a year and a half ahead. Even before I was born he'd been around and had already seen the world from his height of maybe three feet. We were made of the same metal, but he had a head start.

Oh, yes, I longed to see him, and see him I did in rather strange circumstances. Girls were being seen for my marriage, and I had gone to Calcutta to meet one. She turned out to be heart-stoppingly beautiful. One look and I was besotted. I'd marry this girl, I decided, if I married at all. An elderly gentleman in her family caught hold of my hands and declared, tears of gratitude in his eyes, that I was ten times more handsome and more deserving than they had been told. The wedding was finalized. It was then that I was introduced to the rest of the family members and among them was the bride's brother, a handsome well-groomed fellow about my age. Standing next to him was none other than Dukhia! Even as he extended his hand to offer his congratulations I hugged him impulsively. 'Where did you vanish to?' I

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asked him, breaking the stunned silence. 'Imagine popping up here of all places! But boy, you do seem to fit into the picture. Surely you've made your couple of crores by now. Tell me how you gravitated into the orbit of this family. Don't tell me you had your eye on my wife-to-be!' With that last thought, my embrace slackened, and I looked deep into his eyes. The truth dawned on me: Dukhia had lost out to me! He had lost out to someone for the first time! Of course he pretended he didn't mind. Why had he lost — because of his sharp angular face, his brooding eyes, his drooping moustache? For whatever reason, the thing was he had lost out to me.

I cottoned on soon enough, however. Dukhia hadn't married my wife because he wanted to remain her eternal lover. Oh, she seemed to have nothing but pity for him; me too. He visited us often enough, but then one day a shadow darkened my vision, and I looked deep into his eyes. Imagine my shock when it registered that he hadn't given up hope, that he'd kept the embers of war burning. Suddenly I realised he'd gained the advantage over me yet again. Why had my wife fallen into the routine of visiting her folks unfailingly one week every month? Why? Everytime I flew to Calcutta to check up on her I found Dukhia there.

One day I cornered him. 'Look Dukhia, we've one last

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duel to fight. We're both itching for it; I know it. A duel with medieval weapons like swords or pistols is out. Let's enter politics and fight elections. Come to Orissa. He raised his head, and his brooding eyes seemed to say, yes, by all means. Since he had always wanted me to hand him a defeat, he'd have one to cherish the rest of his life. Would he accept it easily? My beautiful wife was too exciting a prize; he wanted to inflict one more defeat on me.

What a no-holds-barred fight it turned out to be. I built roads in the constituency we were contesting from. He had canals dug. I built bridges. He built houses. I set up a school, he a college. All this even before the actual campaign began. Then started the public meetings and the war of words. If I addressed fifteen meetings, he upped me by one or two more. He practically pitched his tent in the constituency and lived there, his workers fanning out to every nook and corner to establish grassroot contacts and find out the needs and hopes of the electorate. Sometimes I had the sincere wish that Dukhia would win: of the two of us he was the more intelligent, and the more capable. What a high standard of administration and organization he'd have set had he lived!

My campaign managers turned out to be turncoats and drunkards. I didn't stint on expenses, but they didn't

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reciprocate with hard work. I once called a crucial meeting of these scumbags and made a heavy emotional pitch: aren't there a few among you, I asked, who'll help me save myself from Dukhia?

I don't know what came over me later that evening: I walked into Dukhia's tent. Wearing a batik lungi and a half-sleeved vest, a red-and-white length of material wound carelessly around his head, he was engrossed in some calculation.

'Listen, Dukhia,' I said. 'You're going to win. I was always jealous of you and I still am, but you weren't born to taste defeat.' He remained silent. Or did he? I can't recollect exactly, but I remember the look he gave me from under his red-and-white cloth. I just can't put it out of my mind. Once in school we had decided to run a marathon. Dukhia had looked pitifully emaciated, but his eyes had proclaimed for everyone to see: I might die but I won't give up!

As I left his tent I thought to myself, of what use are my campaign tricks? Trying to trick Dukhia, spreading canards against him and expecting people to buy all that, trying to scare the wits out of him — nothing had worked. Nothing at all. If I couldn't win against him, no one could.

The incident took place that same night.

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I can't for the life of me remember what happened for the next seven days. Everything's a blur. The turmoil in my heart matched that in the world.

Dukhia vanished without a trace. Where had he vanished to — my soul mate, my rival? I was mad with worry. But neither hide nor hair of him was to be seen again. A thousand and one rumours made the rounds — but who cared?

I remember sticking to my camp all day long, all week long. I felt Dukhia's presence the whole time – his mighty, magnetic pull. I couldn't stand up steadily.

I won the election. Or did I? Dukhia wasn't around. So what did it matter? Then I heard he had been poisoned and dumped into the waters of the Biluakhai, his hands and legs tied together, weighted down with a rock. I fell into a swoon. Crooked Arm Bhagia and three of his accomplices had done him in hoping for a handsome reward from me. I had the bastards killed.

For the past fifteen years the sea has stood parted for me. I have ruled the earth. My power has increased many times; I've gone from strength to strength. No one has been able to stop me or to thwart my triumphal march. Has the only one who could have now risen from the bottom of the river? After all these years? Has he overcome the deadliest poison? Where has he been

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hiding all this time, in which dense forest? Has he been busy practising black magic so he could turn the tables on me? All right, I'll admit it, it was I who killed him. Or had him killed. One and the same thing. He'd have killed me if I hadn't him. Two sharp swords can never share the same scabbard. No way. But Dukhia wasn't my only rival, he was my soul mate too, my guru, my god — I would have offered him everything I had on a platter, even my beautiful wife. But he had already won her from me. My wealth, my fame and my power meant so little to me.

Why has he decided to re-enter my field of vision and torture me? In his batik lungi, short-sleeved vest, his head covered with a red-and-white cloth. Waiting like a hangman to slip the black hood over my head. Why's he following me around like a shadow? To dash me to the cold ground from my heights of glory? To leave nothing beneath my feet? To leave nothing above them? Both earth and sky gone, with me suspended nowhere? Topple me from my throne and make it melt away like the snowy crest of a hill? Does he expect me to go down without a fight? Never mind. But why such secrecy, such hush-hush? Why this attempt to make me afraid? One word from him and I'm ready to slip my head into the noose. Do I care two hoots for my empire, the empire I've built with so much care and effort? Without him a war is no

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war, no victory is sweet. He's stolen the edge off my sword, the salt from my life.

Dukhia is already ahead of me by fifteen years, but I can bridge the gap with one breathless jump. There's no lack of Crooked Arm Bhagias to poison and dump me into some river, a heavy rock tied to my hands and legs. I have no bones to pick with them on this score. After all, that was how my Dukhia was eliminated. An emperor like him was made to meet a watery grave clad in a lungi and a vest. But did he care? Did he deign to take you on, you lowlifes? I, Bhanu Singh, won't take you on either. No. Bring me the cup of poison, hand it to me with a respectful bow and I'll drink it down in one gulp. Any day. But you wretches will never take me on, you're too chicken.

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